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Looking better . . . from 3,400 feet

STANDING ATOP MT. UMUNHUM, WITH A GREAT VIEW, THOUGHTS TURN TO TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

By Phil Yost

AS a major tourist destination, San Jose isn't quite there. A brutally honest travel magazine ad might say: San Jose, pretty close to lots of great places.

In the Santa Clara Valley you are less than an hour from the redwood giants in Big Basin; an hour from San Francisco; inside 90 minutes from Monterey Bay or the Big Sur coast; two hours from the Napa wineries; four hours from Yosemite.

Standing 3,400 feet above the valley floor on the top of Mt. Umunhum the other day, I was thinking: Don't sell the South Bay short; there are some really great places right here.

From various points on the top of the mountain, you can see Monterey Bay, Mt. Hamilton on the other side of the Almaden and Coyote valleys, downtown San Jose, and much of the Santa Clara Valley spread out below you.

I should qualify that to say that you can see forever if you have been invited to the mountaintop by the Mid-Peninsula Regional Open Space District, which owns it. Otherwise, the gates across the road to the summit are locked.

Happily, there is reason to hope they will be opened within a few years, and that Santa Clara County will enjoy a marvelous preserve.

Before the summit can be opened to the public, the former Air Force installation there has to be shaped up. The abandoned buildings present chemical and physical hazards. (An editorial elsewhere on the page explains why the federal government ought to pay part of the cleanup cost.)

Then, the open space district will have to figure out what kind of preserve it wants. In November, it will begin a planning process, open to the public, to decide about roads, facilities, trails and so forth.

The preserve is far more than the summit. Called the Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve, it covers 15,500 acres from the valley floor to the mountain top, much of which is already open to the public. Different levels of use will be appropriate in different parts of its varied terrain. Much will need to remain undisturbed, to protect the wildlife and to keep the watersheds, which feed four reservoirs,

uncontaminated.

What happens at the summit is a different story. Here's where I'm hoping for a vigorous public discussion. After all, taxpayers within the district already have put up \$32 million buying the park.

Restoring the summit to the form nature gave it might not be the best choice. The district ought to at least consider making -- or maybe the better word is ``leaving" -- the summit more developed.

The summit can be reached by a two-lane road that, by the standards of windy roads to mountaintops, is easy to drive. The remains of a water system, a sewer system, an electric grid and a network of streets exist there, in addition to buildings that are probably not savable.

A large part of the value of the summit is the view. Under any park plan, people will be allowed to hike up. But the slopes are steep, and the chaparral vegetation provides little shade.

Many more people will enjoy the view if the road to the top is open to cars. In the Bay Area, Mt. Tamalpais, Mt. Diablo and Mt. Hamilton can be ``climbed" by car.

Cleanup at the summit, and ongoing supervision of a populated summit aren't the only issues. The route to the top crosses private property. Agreements with owners will have to be reached. That's what the planning process is for.

Mt. Umunhum is not the only place that offers a panoramic view of the valley, or the chance to get in touch with nature. Compared with many other urban areas, this one has done a good job of protecting the forested mountains around the valley.

Even so, Mt. Umunhum would be a major addition. The slopes and the summit are beautiful and accessible. A new park there would make San Jose even closer to a great place to visit.

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